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ABSTRACT

Perry's theory of intellectual and ethical development of college students is briefly reviewed. This theory was based on work with Harvard University students, and addresses dualism, multiplicity, and relativism. In the first stage, a student sees the world in right-wrong, black-white terms, with no room in the thinking process for conditional or contextual reasoning. The assumption of the dualist is that all knowledge is known, that authority knows it all, and that it is up to authority to give the student the right answer. Multiplicity represents a significant broadening of the student's understanding: the student begins to realize that there might be more than one right answer or way of looking at some things. The view of authority is that in areas where there are several right answers, authority has not found the right answer yet, but will eventually; in other areas, authority will have the answer. Multiplistic students are still not able to weigh one perspective against another, or to see the relative merit of one perspective versus another. As students move into relativism, a fundamental shift in thinking takes place. They realize that in many areas there are no right answers and are now capable of thinking in relativistic or contextual terms. Relationship to authority changes significantly during relativism as students begin to realize that professors think that way too, and although students still look to authority for guidance they see that they themselves can reason too. Later, through a sense of identity and a series of commitments, the student is able to make sense out of reality that was so elusive during relativism. (SW)

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HEARING HOW STUDENTS "MAKE MEANING":

LISTENING THROUGH PERRY EARS

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Perry's Theory of Intellectual and Ethical Development -- A Summary

Fall, 1981

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PERRY'S THEORY OF INTELLECTUAL & ETHICAL DEVELOPMENT OF COLLEGE STUDENTS--A SUMMARY

Although no one can explain the Perry Scheme better than Perry himself, we include this brief description for those of you who would like a brief overview before he arrives on campus. He developed his "intellectual and ethical" development theory as a result of many years working with and interviewing Harvard students. As is the case with cognitive development theories, movement through the stages must progress in order, the thinking abilities measured at each stage are prerequisite to subsequent stages, and thinking is qualitatively different and more complex at each subsequent stage. For other summaries of the theory, see King (1978), Widick (1977), or Rodgers (1980). Of course, we heartily recommend Perry's book, Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years, for those of you who want a thorough reading.

Dualism--In the first stage, students see the world in right-wrong, black-white terms, with no room in the thinking process for conditional or contextual reasoning; everything is either right or wrong. For example, when describing what she liked about a course, a dualistic student told us, "The professor always tells us what the right answer is. Then you know anything else is wrong."

The assumption of the dualist is that all knowledge is known, that authority knows it all, and that it is up to authority to give the student the right answer. If authority (parent, professor, coach, head resident, etc.) does not give clear-cut answers, then that authority is incompetent: "That professor is terrible. He gives us all this conflicting stuff and won't tell us what the right answer is. How am I supposed to know?"

Multiplicity--Multiplicity represents a significant broadening of the student's understanding. No longer is the world seen exclusively in right-wrong terms, but the student begins to realize that there might be more than one "right" answer or way of looking at things in some areas. The multiplistic student would be more able to think about the "conflicting stuff" with which the dualist had so much trouble.

The view of authority is that in areas where there are several "right" answers, authority has not found the right answer yet, but will eventually; in other areas, authority still has the answer. In later stages of multiplicity, this recognition of different points of view is manifest in a "do your own thing" approach, i.e., if we do not know the right answer, then one idea is as good as another. A student talked about a situation in which he was asked what would happen if he had an assignment in which there were no right or wrong answers. His response: "If we don't know what right answer the professor is looking for, then we're all entitled to our own opinion. Any answer is as good as another." Another example is the student who complains about a "C" she got on a paper because she did not cite evidence or support arguments. The student's complaint is, "But there are no right answers. You can't evaluate my work--my opinions are as good as anyone else's."

Multiplistic students are still not able to weigh one perspective against another, or to see the relative merit of one perspective versus another. As they move further through multiplicity, they begin to see relativistic thinking as a special way of thinking, but only to be done because "that's how they want us to think." They have learned to play the game.

Relativism--As students move into Relativism, a fundamental shift in thinking takes place. They realize that in many areas there are no right answers and are now capable of thinking in relativistic or contextual terms. They understand that there are multiple perspectives on a given topic and that they can reason relativistically about those perspectives. They can argue one side of an issue with one set of assumptions and then turn around and argue another side with a new set of assumptions. One student described this to us this way: "You may say 'This is the answer,' but if you look at it this way, you say 'This is the answer', and if you look at it yet another way, then 'This is the answer.' It just depends."

Relationship to authority changes significantly during relativism as students begin to realize that "professors think that way too," and although students still look to authority for guidance, they see that they themselves can reason too. The ability to think at this level opens up a whole new world to the student but this world is unfamiliar and frustrating because there are fewer right answers and because there are so many ways of viewing things. The student has not yet made sense of it all. It becomes apparent that the way out of all this is to make some initial commitments or decisions that seem appropriate. The whole way of viewing the world has changed, and with it has come the necessity of making relativistic and contextual decisions.

Commitment in Relativism--The final stage of Commitment does not involve structural changes in cognitive development as did the earlier stages, but rather involves qualitative stages through which a student moves in developing and living with a series of commitments and sense of identity. Through these commitments, the student is able to make sense out of reality that was so elusive during relativism. In moving through these positions, the student

makes an initial commitment in some area (or areas), such as career, life style, and basic values, then in subsequent stages the student learns and understands the implications of that commitment and eventually integrates all aspects into a total identity. This process is critical for students to understand their places in a pluralistic world, though it is really the first six positions that give us our understanding of the changes in the cognitive processes.

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AN ACADEMIC ADVISING VIEW OF STUDENT ACADEMIC TASKS AS RELATED TO PERRY LEVELS

	DUALISM	MULTIPLICITY	RELATIVISM	COMMITMENT
CHOOSING COURSES	- Wants advisor to do it - Takes parents' advice	Sees possibility that advisor may not have the final answer	- Knows there are some choices	- Sees reasons for making own choices and that they come from within self.
CHOOSING MAJORS	- Waiting for authority to tell which major should be chosen	- Hears about other majors but finds it confusing--can't make decision	- Is able to consider various choices and rationally gather information	- Has gathered and accommodated information and made a commitment
CHOOSING CAREERS	- Wants authority to tell which is <u>the</u> right career	- Too much information available; doesn't know how to discriminate	- Can realistically relate abilities and knowledge to specific career and make appropriate assessment	- Can make a commitment and follow through on it in relationship to knowledge about self
SELF-DEVELOPMENT	- Sees outside authority as more important than self	- Begins to realize there is more than one source of authority	- Beginning to see self as important inner authority for action	- Is autonomous

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Role Play

This packet contains two role playing activities: the BLUE activity, and the YELLOW activity. We will do each one separately in a group of three people. In each activity you will be assigned either the role of the student, the advisor or an observer. When we have completed all activities you will have had the chance to play two of the three roles. Specific details about the setting of the role play and what you are to do in your assigned role are provided on the BLUE and YELLOW sheets.

For example, in the BLUE activity you may be assigned the role of student. Your two colleagues, then, will be the advisor and the observer. In general, your role as the student will mean that you will be told what Perry level you are to act out (dualism, multiplicity, relativism or commitment). The advisor will be told that his/her role is to assess what your Perry level is by what you say and to respond accordingly. Finally, the observer will be told to pay attention to the process and interaction occurring between the advisor and the student to determine whether or not the student is behaving according to the Perry level assigned and if the advisor is responding appropriately to the assigned level. The observer will not know what Perry level the student was assigned.

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BLUE ACTIVITY

THE SETTING--In this situation, the student has sought out her academic advisor because she just received a letter from her Dean saying that she must declare a major before the end of the semester. Evidently, she has earned too many credit hours not to have chosen a major. The student's parents have been telling her to get a degree in education, because that's a good job for women and one of her professors told her since she was good in math she should be an engineer. She comes to the advisor in this context.

YOUR ROLE--Academic Advisor. You are expected to identify whether this student is in dualism, multiplicity, relativism or commitment in relativism. Once you have determined this, respond in a way that you think is appropriate to the student and her Perry level.

What you are supposed to do - Spend about 5 to 10 minutes role playing this situation. When you are finished, the person in the OBSERVER role will have some questions to ask you for discussion.

BLUE ACTIVITY

THE SETTING--In this situation, the student has sought out her academic advisor because she just received a letter from her Dean saying that she must declare a major before the end of the semester. Evidently, she has earned too many credit hours not to have chosen a major. The student's parents have been telling her to get a degree in education, because that's a good job for women and one of her professors told her since she was good in math she should be an engineer. She comes to the advisor in this context.

YOUR ROLE--OBSERVER. In your role as observer, you are to determine 1) how accurate the academic advisor was in deciding what the Perry level of the student was, 2) how appropriate the advisor's responses were to the student given the Perry level of the student, and 3) how accurately the student role played the given Perry level. Use the criteria given in the theory part of this presentation as your guidelines for accuracy.

When the role play is completed, it is your task to lead a short discussion with the other two people in your group to debrief the role play. The purpose of the debrief is twofold. First, give the other two people a chance to talk about what they experienced during the role play. When they have completed this, use the three points under observer, above, as the focus of the discussion.

What you are supposed to do - Spend about 5 to 10 minutes role playing this situation. When you are finished, the person in the OBSERVER role will have some questions to ask you for discussion.

BLUE ACTIVITY

THE SETTING--In this situation, the student has sought out her academic advisor because she just received a letter from her Dean saying that she must declare a major before the end of the semester. Evidently, she has earned too many credit hours not to have chosen a major. The student's parents have been telling her to get a degree in education, because that's a good job for women and one of her professors told her since she was good in math she should be an engineer. She comes to the advisor in this context.

THE ROLE--The Student. You are to role play the student as one who is a DUALIST. This means that you expect the academic advisor to be able to tell you the right major for you (authority has the right answer) and that if he or she fails to do this, you become frustrated because he or she must be incompetent. If the advisor tells you the right answer, then your job is to find out how to get the courses you need for the major and to find out what the right procedure is for getting enrolled in the major. The fact that 2 professors gave your conflicting advice (education, engineering) is upsetting.

What you are supposed to do - Spend about 5 to 10 minutes role playing this situation. When you are finished, the person in the OBSERVER role will have some questions to ask you for discussion.

YELLOW ACTIVITY

THE SETTING--In this situation, the student you are seeing has come to see you at your request. You asked to see this student because after reviewing his files, you noticed that the courses he had been taking during the last two semesters were completely random, i.e. they did not fit into any degree program. You are concerned that there might be something the matter.

YOUR ROLE--The Student. You are to role play the student who is in later stages of MULTIPLICITY. Since you recognize that authorities disagree and because of this there may be multiple right answers, you feel that all students have a right to take whatever courses they want to. After all, the university authorities really don't know what courses are best for you. However, since your advisor called you in, he must think he knows what is best for you.

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YOUR ROLE--Academic advisor. You are expected to identify whether this student is in dualism, multiplicity, relativism or commitment in relativism. Once you have determined this, respond in a way that you think is appropriate to the student and her Perry level.

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YOUR ROLE--OBSERVER. In your role as observer, you are to determine 1) how accurate the academic advisor was in deciding what the Perry level of the student was, 2) how appropriate the advisor's responses were to the student given the Perry level of the student, and 3) how accurately the student role played the given Perry level. Use the criteria given in the theory part of this presentation as your guidelines for accuracy. When the role play is completed, it is your task to lead a short discussion with the other two people in your group to debrief the role play. The purpose of the debrief is twofold. First, give the other two people a chance to talk about what they experienced during the role play. When they have completed this, use the three points under observer, above, as the focus of the discussion.